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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a brief overview of American Sign Language (ASL) and discusses its study as a foreign language in U.S. schools and institutions of higher education. The following questions are addressed: (1) Is ASL a language?; (2) If ASL is used in the United States, how can it be considered a "foreign" language; (3) Are ASL users in this country part of a different culture; (4) Is there a body of literature in ASL?; and (5) Is ASL easier to learn than other foreign languages? A 10-item list of ASL resources is provided. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/JL)

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American Sign Language as a Foreign Language

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In recent years, a number of states have passed legislation recognizing American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language and permitting high schools and universities to accept it in fulfillment of foreign language requirements for hearing as well as deaf students. As of July 1997, 28 states had passed such legislation, and several community colleges and universities (including Brown, Georgetown, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Purdue, and the University of Washington) accept ASL as a foreign language for academic or elective credit.

ASL is a visual/gestural language, distinct from English and other spoken languages, from sign languages used in other countries, and from English-based sign systems used in the United States (such as manually coded English systems). Although the precise number of ASL users is difficult to determine, ASL is the predominant language—in other words, the language used most frequently for face-to-face communication, learned either as a first or second language—of an estimated 100,000 to 500,000 Americans (Padden, 1987), including Deaf native signers, hearing children of Deaf parents, and adult Deaf signers who have learned ASL from other Deaf individuals.

As schools have decided to grant foreign language credit for ASL, they have had to address a number of questions, some of which are discussed below. (See Wilcox, 1989b, and Wilcox, n.d., for more detailed discussion).

Is ASL a Language?

ASL is a fully developed language, one of hundreds of naturally occurring signed languages of the world, with a complex grammatical structure (see, e.g., Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Valli & Lucas, 1993).

If ASL Is Used in the United States, How Can It Be Considered a "Foreign" Language?

ASL is indigenous to the United States and parts of Canada. At most universities, however, a language's place of origin has little to do with its status as a foreign language. For example, American Indian languages such as Navajo are accepted in fulfillment of university foreign language requirements. Because many native speakers of the languages studied in our schools live in the United States and were even born here, many programs are beginning to refer to themselves as second language programs rather than foreign language programs.

Are ASL Users in This Country Part of a Different Culture?

American ASL users are members of American culture. In addition, they participate in a rich and vibrant Deaf culture that has its own history, arts (e.g., dance, theater, poetry), and customs (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Wilcox, 1989a).

Is There a Body of Literature in ASL?

There are writing systems for ASL, but none are widely used to record ASL literature. However, there is a large body of ASL literature available in movies, videotapes, and CDs from companies such as Dawn Sign Press and Sign Enhancers, Inc., and from Gallaudet University's bookstore in Washington, DC. Gannon (1981) is an excellent source of information about the heritage and folklore of Deaf people.

Is ASL Easier to Learn Than Other Foreign Languages?

Because ASL developed as a visual/gestural language, its grammar differs from that of English and other languages that developed as oral/aural languages; ASL has a much more complex verbal aspect and classifier system than English. Some students of ASL believe it is more difficult to learn than oral languages.

Designers of ASL programs need to consider issues related to curriculum and materials, teacher qualifications, and evaluation of students' proficiency. Students need to develop both expressive and receptive fluency in ASL, have opportunities to interact with Deaf individuals and attend events in the Deaf community, and have access to the rich body of ASL literature. ASL classes should be taught by teachers who have a formal background in second language pedagogy, experience in teaching ASL, and verifiable proficiency in ASL.

Ideally, the teacher or a co-teacher would be a native ASL user. Some schools require that teachers be certified by the American Sign Language Teachers Association. Students learning ASL need to be evaluated according to proficiency guidelines in the same way as students learning spoken languages. An ASL proficiency test, the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI), has been developed by William Newell and Frank Caccamise (Caccamise & Newell, 1997; Newell and Caccamise, 1997), based on the widely used oral proficiency interview (OPI). Although developed for use with adults, the principles and techniques of the SCPI may be adapted for use with students in K-12 programs. See the resources listed below for contact information concerning use and adaptation of these materials and training workshops.

References

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Resources

American Sign Language Teachers Association (ASTLA)
814 Thayer Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910-4500 301-587-1788 (voice)
301-587-1789 (TTY)
http://www.rit.edu/~gspncm or http://www.nad.org

Dawn Sign Press
6130 Nancy Ridge Drive
San Diego, CA 92121-3223
619-549-5330 (voice and TTY); 800-549-5350

Gallaudet University Press
800 Florida Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-3695
800-621-2736 (voice); 888-630-9347 (TTY)
800-621-8476 (fax)
http://www.gallaudet.edu/~gupress

National Association of the Deaf (NAD)
814 Thayer Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910-4500
301-587-1788 (voice); 301-587-1789 (TTY)
http://www.nad.org

Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI)
Rochester Institute of Technology
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
52 Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, NY 14623-5604
Contact: Frank Caccamise
716-475-6420 (voice and TTY); 716-475-6500 (fax)
fccncr@rit.edu (email)

Sign Enhancers, Inc.
1320 Edgewater NW
Suite B10, Room C-1
Salem, OR 97304
800-76-SIGN-1 (voice and TTY)

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Following standard practice among most researchers and educators, capitalized *Deaf* is used to refer to the culture of the Deaf people. Lowercase *deaf* refers to the audiological condition of deafness.

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